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THE FRIEND OF LEPERS

Father Damien

BY

UNA SNOW

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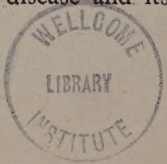
INTRODUCTION

We know how much is being done to help lepers. Some of you will have visited the leper colonies, and some of you may be patients in one of them. Here is the life of one of the first leaders in caring for lepers, who lived before doctors knew as much as they do to-day about the disease and its treatment.



1. Childhood

About a hundred years ago in the village of Tremeloo in Belgium, three children sat at their mother's feet in front of the big open fire of the farm kitchen. They were the three youngest children of François de Veuster, a farmer. Their names were Auguste, Pauline, and Joseph. Their mother was reading to them out of a big book called "Lives of the Saints." It was an old book with many pictures showing the saints of old suffering for the sake of their Christian faith.

Both the farmer and his wife were good Christian people, and the few books they had were religious books. When their mother was busy and their older brothers out on the farm working with their father, the three young ones acted the stories from the big book. So young Joseph de Veuster grew up with a mind full of faith and love for the heroes of the Church.

He was a silent boy, but strong, healthy, and courageous. Among his friends in the village was the blacksmith. Joseph watched him at work with his blazing fire and heavy tools. The blacksmith saw that the boy was strong, and taught him how to use the tools. The blacksmith was also the grave-digger for the village, and Joseph often went with him to the churchyard and learnt how graves should be dug.

Whatever Joseph did, he threw all his strength into it. It was the same with his religion. After a sermon on "Charity" Joseph, seeing a beggar, ran into his mother's kitchen, took the ham ready for their dinner, and gave it to him!

2. SCHOOLDAYS

Belgium is a country in which two languages are spoken. The people in the north are called Flemings and speak Flemish: the people in the south are Walloons and speak French. There was always great rivalry between the two races. The de Veuster family were Flemings. Of the six children, the three eldest were to be farmers like their father. Auguste wished to become a priest, and Pauline wished to become a nun. François de Veuster decided that Joseph, the youngest, should be a merchant. For this he must learn French and needed more education than he could get in the village of Tremeloo, so he was sent away to a Walloon school some distance from his home.

It was his first parting from his family, and the life in a Walloon school, when he knew no French, was full of difficulties. But he wrote home cheerfully. In his first letter he said, "I talk to the Walloons a little. I know my work, my lessons, my companions, my bed. . . . . Any Walloon that laughs at me I hit with a ruler." Before long he was able to speak French easily, but he made few friends. At this time, as all through his life, his brother Auguste seems to have been his best friend. Auguste, who had now taken the name of Pamphile, was happy in his life in the monastery of the Picpus Fathers in Paris.

Joseph went for long walks into the country by himself. He envied his brother and sister who had found happiness as a priest and a nun. He knew how much his father wanted him to become a merchant. He knew how much sacrifice his parents had made

to send him away to school. But he felt in his heart that he was being called by God to a life of service in the Church. At last he wrote to his father, "Would it not be possible for me to follow my brother Pamphile?"

At first François de Veuster was very angry, but his wife persuaded him to talk the matter over with the village priest. The priest advised him not to oppose the boy. Time would show if his desire to become a priest came from a true religious calling. Time showed that Joseph was most serious, and a visit to Pamphile increased his wish to become a monk. At nineteen he entered the same order as his brother. When the time came for him to change his name to the new one which marked his change of life, he chose the name of Damien, a saint who had been a brave doctor and had died for the faith in the third century.

3. Damien

Joseph, or Damien, as he was to be called, had not had the education needed for a priest. He was strong and willing, however, and he was accepted as a lay-brother and sent to help the workmen who were building a new chapel. There was a high chimney to be pulled down. It was old and shaky, and none of the workmen dared to go up to pull it down. Joseph quietly climbed up and took down the chimney brick by brick while the workmen below exclaimed, "What a man!"

Whenever he was free, Pamphile gave him lessons in Latin. As usual, he worked hard and made quick progress. Before long he was allowed to join the

students who were preparing to become priests at the University of Louvain.

The Religious Order to which Damien belonged was a missionary order, and its work was in the Sandwich, or Hawaiian Islands, in the Pacific Ocean. Damien was still a student when the monastery was visited by a missionary bishop from the Pacific, and Pamphile and Damien were filled with a great desire to go to the South Seas. In 1863 an appeal came for more young men to go to Hawaii, and the two brothers volunteered. Damien was told that he could not go as he was not yet ordained priest, but Pamphile was among those chosen. All the preparations were made when Pamphile was taken ill; it was impossible for him to go. Damien broke all rules and wrote direct to the Head of the Order begging to be allowed to go in his brother's place, and his request was granted.

4. To the South Seas

Damien set out with a number of priests and nuns in a sailing ship bound for the Hawaiian Islands. He made friends with the Captain, who lent him books to read. He tucked up his cassock and climbed the rigging with the men. He was always happy on a ship.

After five months at sea they reached Honolulu. The first sight of the beautiful islands filled Damien with joy and excitement. The flowers, the cheerful laughing islanders, the joyful welcome from the Christians, the service of thanksgiving in the Cathedral, were all described in his letters home. To

the end of his life he wrote to his family and looked with eagerness for letters from them. To Pamphile he wrote very fully about his work.

He was ordained priest two months after his arrival. The Bishop travelled with him to his first parish on Hawaii. This was the largest of the eight inhabited islands of the group. The Bishop was a very fine man, respected by all. He lived a hard life, for his work was in all the eight islands and he travelled between them. He made friends with Damien at once. Like his Bishop, Damien was facing a life of adventure. On the way to his island home the ship caught fire and only the calm authority of the Bishop prevented panic. They landed on another island where they waited for a ship to take them on to Hawaii.

5. His First Parishes

Damien, at the age of twenty-four, was in charge of a parish it took three days to cross. There was no church. He began to build one, which was the first of many. In 1874 he wrote, "These ten years I have been in the Mission I have built a church or chapel every year." He himself designed the building and took the chief share in the work. The people, who were sometimes lazy, saw the priest toiling in the sun and came to help. Stories of his strength were passed from mouth to mouth.

He walked to every part of his parish with his pack on his back, administering the Sacraments and holding services for the scattered Catholics. He wrote of

his people, "You could not wish for a better people, so gentle, pleasant mannered, exceedingly tender-hearted they are."

He worked ceaselessly, building, travelling, and teaching.

After a year, he volunteered to go to a still larger district to relieve a priest who was ill. Here he travelled again over long distances on horseback, by canoe, and on foot. No part of his parish was unvisited. He had a narrow escape from drowning on one journey; on another he lost himself for four days among the mountains, and was found exhausted and unconscious by some of his parishioners. In this district too he built churches, but often he had only a small grass hut or shelter of leaves in which to celebrate Mass.

His people were proud of his strength and courage but he had his enemies. There were those who clung to the old spirit-religion and performed secret rites in the night. One of these rites he interrupted and saw an image of himself in the hands of the witchdoctor. He broke in upon the startled worshippers, and gave them a scolding and destroyed his own image.

This made him realize the need for schools and for teaching. He appealed to the Government at Honolulu; he appealed to the Bishop; and teachers were sent. The fame of this energetic young priest was spreading through the islands.

In 1870 he wrote to Pamphile, "Leprosy is beginning to be very prevalent here. There are many men covered with it. It does not cause death at once but is rarely cured. The disease is very dangerous because it is highly contagious."

6. Leprosy

Leprosy is a very ancient disease. The Egyptians called it "Death before death"; it was known in Egypt thousands of years ago. It spread in Europe very rapidly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but died out in England in the fourteenth century.

The disease first appeared in the Hawaiian Islands in about 1853, and in ten years it spread rapidly. In 1870 the Government tried to prevent it from spreading further. As no cure was known, the lepers were separated from the healthy. This was the law in the Old Testament, and in Europe when leprosy was common there. A narrow, rocky piece of land running out from the island of Molokai was set apart for lepers. They were not sent there to be cared for, but were given some provisions, tools, and seed, and left to build their own houses and supply themselves with food.

The unhappy lepers went unwillingly. Many of them were unfit to work. There was no authority to keep order, and Molokai, or Kalawao as the settlement was called, became the home of misery, cruelty, and vice. "In this place there is no law," was the boast of the lepers. When the Government sent an official and troops to restore order there was rebellion. On the other islands the fear of Molokai made lepers hide, and their friends helped to conceal them.

In Damien's district a notice was put up that all lepers must report, and he watched with great unhappiness the sad scenes as they were taken away by force.

In 1873, the Bishop called the missionaries together and they discussed their work and difficulties.

He told them of his anxiety about Molokai. Several priests had visited the Catholics among the lepers but they only stayed for a short time. Now the rule was laid down that those who went to the settlement must never return.

At once four young priests volunteered to go, one of these was Damien. He pointed out that he had longer experience in the islands than the others, and the Bishop accepted his offer. All knew that Damien was choosing martyrdom.

There was no delay—no sad farewells—Damien never went back to his parish. He returned to Honolulu with the Bishop and sailed at once to the settlement on a ship carrying fifty lepers. His bishop came with him.

When they arrived, the Bishop and Damien were greeted by a crowd of lepers. "My children," said the Bishop, "I have brought you one who will be a father to you, who loves you so much that for your welfare and for the sake of your immortal souls he does not hesitate to become one of you, to live and die with you."

He blessed Damien, who kneeled bareheaded, and then returned to the ship.

Damien was alone with his lepers.

7. The First Day on Molokai

Damien passed through the village, followed by a crowd of lepers. The village was only a collection of rough huts made of branches, where the women and children sat about, idle and hopeless. He came to the chapel, a little place nearly as simple as the huts.

His first task was to clean the House of God. A leper brought him food. It was then that he made the rule for himself which was the secret of his success and also the cause of his death. He felt horror of the disease, but he vowed that he would never by look, word, or deed, let this horror appear; he would never treat a leper in any way differently from a healthy man.

He worked for four hours cleaning the chapel. The lepers brought him flowers, and with them he made it beautiful. A crowd watched him. He was called from his work to bury a leper. Before he had finished the service an old woman called him to come to her son who was dying.

That night and for many nights he slept under a tree in the open, the tree under which, years later, he asked to be buried.

8. His Work on Molokai

The difficulties of the lonely priest were many. He had to fight against vice, drunkenness, and disorder in the colony. This did not make him popular but, when the lepers saw that here was a man who was not afraid, he managed to get some obedience from them. He knew that if he could get them to work and give them some purpose for which to work, there would be less vice and greater happiness. He first improved the conditions under which the eight hundred lepers were living. There was no water supply in the settlement, but in the hills behind there was plenty of good water. He began by asking the Government for water pipes, medical supplies, and a doctor. After some

delay he got the pipes and persuaded the stronger lepers to help him lay them to carry water from the hills to the settlement. They were delighted to find they could now drink and wash.

The burials troubled him, for many were too lazy or too weak to dig deep graves and few troubled to make coffins. So the tasks of grave-digger and coffin-maker were added to his duties.

The huts in which the people lived were dark and dirty. They were made of branches, and were blown about by the winds and flooded by the rains. It was impossible to attend to the sick and dying in these filthy homes. Damien asked the Government for building materials. This time the ship's captain persuaded him to come to Honolulu and beg for what he wanted himself. He managed to get an interview with the President of the Board of Health. This official told him angrily that his work ended with the care of the souls of the lepers and that building and reforms were nothing to do with him. Finally he reminded Damien that he had no right to leave the settlement. Damien refused to obey this rule, and said he must go where his work led him. The interview ended in stormy words.

Damien quarrelled with the authorities to the end of his life. He was headstrong and impatient, and often unwise in the wording of his demands. But before him always were the needs of these unhappy sufferers in Molokai.

The Bishop undertook to raise money and send him the needed materials. Before long the rebuilding of the village began. Strong wooden cottages were made in regular rows, each whitewashed and having

its own patch of garden. They were raised from the ground so that they should not be flooded in the rains. The fact that there was work to be done and leadership in the doing of it, brought new life to the leper colony. Damien himself always worked with the rest. A hut near the graveyard was built for him and a hospital for the advanced cases. There he went every morning to wash and bandage and care for the sick and dying.

The Church and its services were to Damien the centre of all his work. He believed that brightness and colour in the worship of God helped these people who naturally loved gaiety and colour. He trained a choir, and the services were attended by Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christians. He also trained leaders who held "reunions" in some of the homes on Sunday evenings. He called them his "Prayer-leaders." Soon the chapel was too small and had to be enlarged, and Damien was busy again with hammer and nails.

Damien always tried to free the dying from the fear of death. "I place death before their eyes as the end of all their evil," he wrote to his brother Pamphile. With the same purpose he started two Burial Associations to carry out funerals with decency and beauty. Each had its own band and choir, and as the people were fond of music and singing these associations were very popular.

9. Visitors

In Damien's third year on Molokai, the Bishop visited the island. He was able to do this because the

order about visits had been altered. An old leper thanked the Bishop for sending Damien to them: "He overwhelms us with his care," he said, "and he himself builds our houses. When anyone of us is ill he gives him tea, biscuits, and sugar, and to the poor he gives clothes; he makes no distinction between Protestants and Catholics." The neglect of many orphan children had distressed Damien. He was able to use gifts of money from the Bishop to build an orphanage for girls. Later he was able to start one for boys.

Another distinguished visitor came to Molokai. This was the Princess, who was acting as ruler while her brother, the King, was away on a visit to Europe. Damien, the Belgian peasant, was disturbed when he heard of this visit, but Damien, the priest and missionary, forgot all his fears when he took the Princess round his parish and told her of all his plans for the future. She was touched and pained by the sights she saw, and said to him that she wondered how anyone could stay there willingly. Damien answered, "It is my work. You see, Madame, they are my parishioners." Later the Princess sent him a medal, as a mark of her admiration for his work. He was glad that she remembered the work, but he did not wish to wear the medal, "I did not come to Molokai for this," he said.

10. "We Lepers"

It was in 1885, when he was forty-five, that one hot Sunday morning he took the service as usual, and coming to the Sanctuary rail to preach he began slowly,

"My brethren, *we lepers* . . . . "

For some time he had thought that he had the disease, and it was confirmed by a doctor who visited the island.

"I would not," he said to the doctor, "have my health restored to me at the price of my having to leave the island and abandon my work here." And work he did. "There is so much left to do," he said, "And my time is so short!" He carried on the services of the Church, he dug the graves, he tended the sick, he wrote constantly pleading the needs of his people.

When the Bishop heard of his leprosy he ordered him to come to Honolulu for a new form of treatment. Soon after Damien had gone to Molokai he had begged for nuns to come to nurse the lepers. Later even the Government asked the Bishop to find some nursing sisters who would come to the islands for this work, and a party of Franciscan Sisters came from America. They were at Honolulu. These sisters received Damien and nursed him with great care, but he was so restless and miserable away from his work that he was allowed to go back to Molokai.

Damien never spared himself and he expected others never to spare themselves. Living so much alone, he was used to having his own way. Helpers who had been sent from time to time had not stayed. But in 1887 Joseph Dutton came to him. He was the helper Damien needed. Dutton was an American who came at his own expense when he heard that Damien was a leper. They worked together until Damien died, and between them there was deep friendship. In 1888, six helpers came, three men and

three women. The three Sisters took charge of the girls' home and the hospital. Money and gifts began to come in and Damien saw his great plans taking shape before he died.

His last four years seem to have been his happiest. He wrote to the Bishop in 1885, "I am calm and resigned and very happy in the midst of my people." Three months before he died he wrote to Pamphile, "Still I am quite happy and contented. May God strengthen me and give me the grace of perseverance and of a happy death."

He who had lived alone so long was surrounded by friends at his death.

"How good God is," he told them, "to have preserved me long enough to have two priests to assist me in my last moments, and then to know the good Sisters of Charity are at the Hospital. The work of the lepers is assured. I am no longer necessary to them, so before long I shall go up yonder."

He died in 1889. But the news of his sacrifice spread through the world. The sympathy it roused started a world-wide effort for stamping out leprosy and for discovering a cure.

At Molokai a large granite cross was set up in memory of Father Damien and on it in the stone are cut the words,

"Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends."

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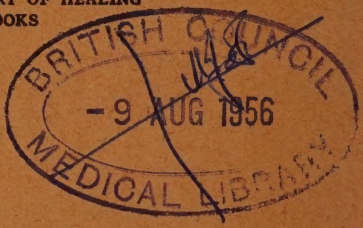

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